

The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education

Susan Howard

The following article was written for Waldorf early childhood educators and mentors. It was included in Mentoring in Waldorf Early Childhood Education, published by the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN Books) in 2007.

Is there a Waldorf early childhood “curriculum?” Are there specific activities – perhaps puppet plays or watercolor painting, for example – that are required in a Waldorf program? Are there certain materials and furnishings – lazured, soft-colored walls, handmade playthings, natural materials, beeswax crayons – that are essential ingredients of a Waldorf setting? What is it that makes Waldorf early childhood education “Waldorf?” Rudolf Steiner spoke on a number of occasions about the essentials of education and of early childhood education. His words shed light on what he considered fundamental:

Essentially, there is no education other than self-education, whatever the level may be. This is recognized in its full depth within Anthroposophy, which has conscious knowledge through spiritual investigation of repeated Earth lives. Every education is self-education, and as teachers we can only provide the environment for children’s self-education. We have to provide the most favorable conditions where, through our agency, children can educate themselves according to their own destinies. This is the attitude that teachers should have toward children, and such an attitude can be developed only through an ever-growing awareness of this fact.”

[Rudolf Steiner, The Child’s Changing Consciousness]

Thus the essential element in early childhood education is actually the educator, who shapes and influences the children’s environment, not only through the furnishings, activities, and rhythms of the day, but most important, through the qualities of her own being and her relationships: to the children and other adults in the kindergarten, to the parents, to daily life in the kindergarten, and to living on earth.

These qualities, which include attitudes and gestures both outer and inner, permeate the early childhood setting and deeply influence the children, who take them up through a process of imitation. The results of such experiences appear much later in the child’s life through predispositions, tendencies, and attitudes toward life’s opportunities and challenges.

Viewed in this way, early childhood education demands an ongoing process of self-education by the adult. If we again ask, what makes a Waldorf program “Waldorf,” the answers might be sought less in the particular activities or rhythms or materials and furnishings, and more in the extent to which these outer aspects are harmonious expressions of inner qualities, attitudes, capacities, and intentions of the teacher – all of which can have a health-giving effect on the children, both in the moment and for the rest of their lives.

Those of us who are committed to this path of Waldorf early childhood education, whether as early childhood teachers or mentors, may actively ask ourselves how qualities essential to the healthy development of young children are living in our own early childhood groups, in our own daily lives, and in our own inner practice.

Rudolf Steiner spoke on a number of occasions about experiences essential for healthy early childhood education, including the following:

- Love and warmth
- Care for the environment and nourishment for the senses
- Creative, artistic experience
- Meaningful adult activity as an example for the child's imitation
- Free, imaginative play
- Protection for the forces of childhood
- Gratitude, reverence, and wonder
- Joy, humor, and happiness
- Adult caregivers on a path of inner development

The following brief descriptions of these qualities and related questions are intended to serve the self-reflection of the individual teacher, the observations of the mentor, and the process of helpful, open dialogue between mentor and mentee.

Love and Warmth

Children who live in an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who have around them truly good examples to imitate, are living in their proper element.

[Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child*]

Love and warmth, more than any programmatic approach to early education, create the basis for development. These qualities are expressed in the gestures that live between adult and child, in the children's behavior toward one another, and also in the social relations among the adults in the early childhood center. In other words, they form the social community of early childhood education. When Rudolf Steiner visited the classes of the first Waldorf school, he was known to ask the school children, "Do you love your teacher?"

Questions we can ask ourselves and discuss in mentoring conversations include the following:

- Are love and warmth living in the atmosphere?
- How are they expressed in the gestures that live between adult and child?
- How are they expressed in the children's behavior toward one another?
- How are the social relations among the adults caring for the children?
- What hindrances exist to creating a loving atmosphere?
- How is love expressed in the teacher's response to "inappropriate" behavior (excessive noise, aggression, disruptions, conflict)?

Less apparent within the day, but also of great significance, are these same qualities of love and warmth in relations with colleagues outside the classroom, with the parents, and with the wider community:

- How are the relations between the early childhood educators and the parents?
- How are the relations with the other colleagues in the early childhood groups and in the rest of the school?
- How does the teacher work with conflict and difficulties with adults?

- Are the children surrounded by a community which offers love and warmth and support?

Care for the Environment and Nourishment for the Senses

The essential task of the kindergarten teacher is to create the “proper physical environment” around the children. “Physical environment” must be understood in the widest sense imaginable. It includes not just what happens around children in the material sense, but everything that occurs in their environment, everything that can be perceived by their senses, that can work on the inner powers of children from the surrounding physical space. This includes all moral or immoral actions, all the meaningful and meaningless behaviors that children witness.

[Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child]

Early learning is profoundly connected to the child’s own physical body and sensory experience. Thus the physical surroundings, indoors and outdoors, should provide nourishing, diverse opportunities for the child’s active self-education. By integrating diverse elements, and bringing them into a meaningful, understandable and harmonious order, the adult provides surroundings that are accessible to the young child’s understanding, feeling, and active will. Such surroundings provide the basis for the development of a sense of coherence. The child unconsciously experiences the love, care, intentions and consciousness expressed through the *outer* furnishings and materials of the classroom. The *inner* qualities offer a moral grounding for the child’s development; the environment is “ensouled” and nurturing.

The adult shapes not only the spatial environment, but also the temporal environment, creating a loving, lively yet orderly “breathing” through rhythm and repetition. Through this healthy breathing process, the child gains a sense of security and confidence in his or her relationship with the world.

Here we can ask:

- Does the environment of the early childhood program offer these qualities of order, care, transparency, and meaning? What is expressed through the outer furnishings and materials?
- Does the space offer diverse opportunities for nourishing experiences in the realm of touch, self-movement, balance, and well-being?
- Are the activities of the day integrated in time into a healthy flow, in which transitions are as smooth and seamless as possible?
- Are there opportunities for lively, joyful physical movement as well as for more inward, listening experience? for large-group, small-group, and solitary experiences?

Creative, Artistic Experience

. . . . [I]n order to become true educators, the essential thing is to be able to see the truly aesthetic element in the work, to bring an artistic quality into our tasks. . . . If we bring this aesthetic element, we then begin to come closer to what the child wills out of its own nature.

[RS, A Modern Art of Education]

In the early childhood class, the art of education is the art of living. The teacher is an artist in how he or she perceives and relates to the children and the activities of daily life. The educator “orchestrates” and “choreographs” the rhythms of each day, the week, and the seasons in such a way that the children can

breathe freely within a living structure. In addition, the teacher offers the children opportunities for artistic experiences through song and instrumental music, movement and gesture (including rhythmic games and eurythmy), speech and language (including verses, poetry, and stories), modeling, watercolor painting and drawing, puppetry and marionettes.

Here we may ask:

- How do the arts live in the kindergarten, in the teacher, and in the children?
- How is the rhythmic flow of time formed?
- Is the teacher engaged artistically in the domestic arts and work processes?
- How is creative, artistic experience of the child fostered through the furnishings and play materials of the kindergarten?
- Is the play of the children creative and artistic in its imagery, its social interactions, its processes?
- Is the teacher's work with individual children both practical and imaginative? What kinds of imaginations inform her work?
- Is the teacher engaged in creative artistic endeavors? Are they striving to deepen their own understanding and experience of what it means to be artistic?

Meaningful Adult Activity as an Example for the Child's Imitation

The task of the kindergarten teacher is to adapt the practical activities of daily life so that they are suitable for the child's imitation through play. . . . The activities of children in kindergarten must be derived directly from life itself rather than being "thought out" by the intellectualized culture of adults. In the kindergarten, the most important thing is to give children the opportunity to directly imitate life itself.

[RS, The Child's Changing Consciousness]

Children do not learn through instruction or admonition, but through imitation. . . . Good sight will develop if the environment has the proper conditions of light and color, while in the brain and blood circulation, the physical foundations will be laid for a healthy sense of morality if children witness moral actions in their surroundings.

[RS, The Education of the Child]

Real, meaningful, purposeful work, adjusted to the needs of the child, is in accordance with the child's natural and inborn need for activity and is an enormously significant educational activity. Thus, rather than offering "thought-out," contrived projects and activities for the children, teachers focus on their own meaningful work through activities that nurture daily and seasonal life in the classroom "home:" cooking and baking, gardening, laundry and cleaning, creating and caring for the materials in the surroundings, and the bodily care of the children.

This creates a realm, an atmosphere, of freedom in which the individuality of each child can be active. It is not intended that the children copy the outer movements and actions of the adult, but rather that they experience the inner work attitude: the devotion, care, sense of purpose, intensity of focus, and creative spirit of the adult. And then, in turn, each child is free to act as an artist-doer in his or her own right, through creative free play and active movement, according to his or her own inner needs and possibilities.

As we observe an early childhood class, we may ask ourselves:

- How does meaningful adult activity live in the group, both indoors and out?
- Do the educators seem able to devote themselves inwardly and outwardly with enthusiasm, in an artistic way, to real life activities and adult work?
- Does the educator appear engaged artistically in a creative process?
- Are the educators' activities truly meaningful and purposeful, in a logical sequence that the child can grasp?
- Do the children imitate the adult's work through their play (not necessarily the outer actions, but perhaps more important, the inner gesture of the adult's work)?
- What qualities are expressed in the children's play?

Free, Imaginative Play

In the child's play activity, we can only provide the conditions for education. What is gained through play stems fundamentally from the self-activity of the child, through everything that cannot be determined by fixed rules. The real educational value of play lies in the fact that we ignore our rules and regulations, our educational theories, and allow the child free rein.

[RS, Self-Education in the Light of Anthroposophy]

And then, a seemingly contradictory indication:

Giving direction and guidance to play is one of the essential tasks of sensible education, which is to say of an art of education that is right for humanity. . . . The early childhood educator must school his or her observation in order to develop an artistic eye, to detect the individual quality of each child's play.

[Untranslated lecture by Rudolf Steiner, Feb. 24, 1921 in Utrecht, Holland]

Little children learn through play. They approach play in an entirely individual way, out of their own unique configuration of soul and spirit, and out of their own unique experiences in the world they live in. In addition, the manner in which each child plays may offer a picture of how they will take up their destiny as an adult.

The task of the kindergarten teacher is to create an environment that supports the possibility for healthy play. This environment includes the physical surroundings, furnishings, and play materials; the social environment of activities and social interactions; and the inner/spiritual environment of thoughts, intentions, and imaginations held by the adults.

We may ask the following questions relating to the children's play in the kindergarten:

- What is the quality and duration of the children's play? Is it active, dynamic, healthy, creative? Are the children self-directed and deeply engaged, socially and individually?
- How does the early childhood teacher reconcile these two seemingly contradictory challenges: to give free rein to the child at play, and to guide and direct and provide the conditions for healthy play to develop?
- What are the themes and images of free play in the kindergarten?
- Do the play materials offer diverse and open-ended possibilities for creativity, social interaction, and bodily movement?

- Are there opportunities for a wide range of play activities outdoors? How are the children active outdoors, compared with indoors? How much time is there for indoor vs. outdoor play?

Protection for the Forces of Childhood

Although it is highly necessary that each person should be fully awake in later life, the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination in which his early years of life are passed. For if we allow his organism to grow strong in this non-intellectual way, he will rightly develop in later life the intellectuality needed in the world today.

[RS, A Modern Art of Education]

The lively, waking dream of the little child's consciousness must be allowed to thrive in the early childhood group. This means that the teacher refrains as much as possible from verbal instruction; instead, their gestures and actions provide a model for the child's imitation, and familiar rhythms and activities provide a context where the need for verbal instruction is reduced. Simple, archetypal imagery in stories, songs, and games provides "digestible" experiences that do not require intellectual or critical reflection or explanation.

Here we may ask ourselves as educators:

- Does the atmosphere in the room foster an imaginative, not-yet-intellectually-awakened consciousness in the children?
- Are the children allowed to immerse themselves fully in play without unnecessary instruction and verbal direction from the adults?
- Are play processes allowed to run their course, or are they interrupted?
- Does a "group consciousness" prevail in group activities, or are children singled out for special privileges and "turns" and offered choices?
- Do the sequence and rhythms of the day carry the children along, or do the children ask what is coming next?
- Does the teacher invite children to participate in activities such as rhythmic circles or finger games through their own activity, or do they wait to see if children are "ready" or verbally explain what is coming?

An Atmosphere of Gratitude, Reverence, and Wonder

An atmosphere of gratitude should grow naturally in children through merely witnessing the gratitude the adults feel as they receive what is freely given by others, and in how they express this gratitude. If a child says "thank you" very naturally – not in response to the urging of others, but simply through imitating – something has been done that will greatly benefit the child's whole life. Out of this an all-embracing gratitude will develop toward the whole world. This cultivation of gratitude is of paramount importance.

[RS, The Child's Changing Consciousness]

Out of these early all-pervading experiences of gratitude, the first tender capacity for love, which is deeply embedded in each and every child, begins to sprout in earthly life.

If, during the first period of life, we create an atmosphere of gratitude around the children, then out of this gratitude toward the world, toward the entire universe, and also out of thankfulness for being able to be in this world, a profound and warm sense of devotion will arise. . . upright, honest and true.

[RS, The Child's Changing Consciousness]

This is the basis for what will become a capacity for deep, intimate love and commitment in later life, for dedication and loyalty, for true admiration of others, for fervent spiritual or religious devotion, and for placing oneself wholeheartedly in the service of the world.

And so we may ask:

- How do gratitude, reverence, and wonder live in the kindergarten?
- Do they come to natural expression from adults and children?
- Are they spontaneous and sincere, or sentimentalized?
- Or if these qualities seem to be missing, how does their absence manifest?

Joy, Humor, and Happiness

The joy of children in and with their environment must therefore be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs. They need teachers who look and act with happiness and, most of all, with honest, unaffected love. Such a love that streams, as it were, with warmth through the physical environment of the children may be said to literally "hatch out" the forms of the physical organs.

[RS, Education of the Child]

If you make a surly face so that a child gets the impression you are a grumpy person, this harms the child for the rest of its life. What kind of school plan you make is neither here nor there; what matters is what sort of person you are.

[RS, The Kingdom of Childhood]

Here we may explore the following questions as educators:

- Do happiness and joy live in this group of children and their teachers?
- What are the most joy-filled aspects of the work?
- Which aspects of the work are least permeated with joy?
- How is the teacher's earnestness and serious striving held in a dynamic balance with humor, happiness, and "honest, unaffected love?"
- Are there moments of laughter and delight in the room? How does humor live in the community of children and adults?

Adult Caregivers on a Path of Inner Development

For the small child before the change of teeth, the most important thing in education is the teacher's own being.

[RS, Essentials of Education]

Just think what feelings arise in the soul of the early childhood educator who realizes: what I accomplish with this child, I accomplish for the grown-up person in his twenties. What matters is not so much a knowledge of abstract educational principles or pedagogical rules. . . . [W]hat does matter is that a deep sense of responsibility develops in our hearts and minds and affects our world view and the way we stand in life.

[RS, "Education In the Face of the Present Day
World Situation," June 10, 1920]

Here we come to the spiritual environment of the early childhood setting: the thoughts, attitudes, and imaginations living in the adult who cares for the children. This invisible realm that lies behind the outer actions of the teacher has a profound influence on the child's development.

The spiritual environment includes recognition of the child as a threefold being – of body, soul and spirit – on a path of evolutionary development through repeated earth lives. This recognition provides a foundation for the daily activities in the kindergarten, and for the relationship between adult and child.

In addition to the questions we have already pondered above, we may ask:

- How is the adult actively engaged in inner development as an early childhood educator, and as a human being?
- How is the educator cultivating a relationship to the children on a spiritual basis?
- How is the educator working with colleagues to foster an environment of spiritual striving and a deepened study of child and human development?
- Does the educator strive to approach their work in such a way that the children in their care are not burdened by unresolved issues in their personal life?
- Do goodness and moral uprightness stream from the being of the teacher? Is their inner and outer activity in coherence with healthy social and ethical values? Is the educator striving to be an example worthy of the children's imitation?
- Does the educator love the children? Do they work to create healthy, caring relationships with the parents, with colleagues, and with the community? Do they love the earth, and the world into which the children are incarnating?
- How does the educator see their own relationship to the past, the present, and the future of our human journey?

This is the very challenging realm of self-knowledge and the activity of the individual ego of the adult – a realm where it is difficult to be objective in our observations. Yet ultimately it is this realm that may affect the development of the children most profoundly. It is not merely our outer activity that affects the developing child; it is what lies behind and is expressed through this outer activity. Ultimately the most profound influence on the child is who we are as human beings – and who and how we are becoming.

Conclusion

The so-called "essentials" described here are qualitative in nature. For the most part, they do not characterize a body of "best practices;" instead, they describe inner qualities and attributes of the adult that foster healthy development in young children. These qualities can come to expression in a wide variety of ways, according to the age range and particular characteristics of the children in a particular

group; the nature of the particular program (a kindergarten or playgroup or extended care program, for example); or the environment and surroundings (urban or rural, home or school or child care center, for example).

Many practices that have come to be associated with Waldorf early childhood education – certain rhythms and rituals, play materials, songs, stories, even the colors of the walls or the dress of the adults or the menu for snack – may be mistakenly taken as essentials. The results of such assumptions can be surprising or even disturbing: a “King Winter” nature table appearing in a tropical climate in “wintertime,” or dolls with pink skin and yellow hair in a kindergarten where all the children in the school and the surrounding culture are brown-skinned and black-haired. Such practices may express a tendency toward a doctrinal or dogmatic approach that is out of touch with the realities of the immediate situation and instead imposes something from “outside.”

There is a parallel concern at the other end of the spectrum from the doctrinal or dogmatic. The freedom that Waldorf education offers each individual teacher to determine the practices of their early childhood program can be misinterpreted to mean that “anything goes,” according to their own personal preferences and style. Here too, there is the danger that the developmental realities and needs of the children are not sufficiently taken into consideration.

Each of these one-sided approaches may be injurious to the development of the children. As Waldorf early childhood educators, we are constantly seeking a middle, universally human path between polarities. Rudolf Steiner’s advice to the first Waldorf kindergarten teacher, Elizabeth Grunelius, in the early 1920’s, could be paraphrased as follows: Observe the children. Actively meditate. Follow your intuitions. Work out of imitation.

Today we are challenged to engage in a constant process of renewal as Waldorf early childhood educators, actively observing today’s children in our care, carrying them in our meditations, and seeking to work consciously and artistically to create the experiences that will serve their development. Our devotion to this task awakens us to the importance of self-education and transformation in the context of community. Our ongoing study of child and human development, our own artistic and meditative practices, and our work with anthroposophy, independently and together with others, become essential elements for the practice of Waldorf early childhood education. Here we can come to experience that we are not alone on this journey; we are supported through our encounters with one other and with spiritual beings offering support toward our continued development and toward the renewal of culture Waldorf education seeks to serve.

* * *